Supreme Court, U.S.
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(1)

No. 05-330

In The

Supreme Court of the United States

AMZAD LALANI,

Petitioner,

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Respondent.

On Petition For A Writ Of Certiorari To The United States Court Of Appeals For The Eleventh Circuit

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTION PRESENTED

I. WHETHER THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT IS CORRECTLY APPLYING PLAIN ERROR REVIEW TO SENTENCES PURSUANT TO *UNITED STATES V. BOOKER* WHERE THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT IS APPLYING PLAIN ERROR REVIEW IN A MANNER WHICH CONFLICTS WITH OTHER CIRCUITS AND WHERE ALL THREE CO-PETITIONERS WERE SENTENCED TO LOWEST END OF GUIDELINE RANGE AND DISTRICT JUDGE STRUGGLED WITH SUBSTANTIAL MOTION FOR DOWNWARD DEPARTURE.

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PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

The Eleventh Circuit denied relief under *United States v. Booker*, 543 U.S. ___, 160 L. Ed. 2d 621, 125 S. Ct. 738 (2005), in an opinion that incorrectly applies the plain error analysis, conflicts with other circuits, and condemns the petitioner to serve an illegal sentence.

OPINIONS BELOW

The opinions of the Eleventh Circuit are *United States v. Lalani*, No. 04-11114 (11th Cir. April 12, 2005) and *United States v. Lalani*, No. 04-11114-II (11th Cir. June 8, 2005) and are attached hereto as Appendices A and B of this Petition.

STATEMENT OF JURISDICTION

Jurisdiction is conferred on this Court by Title 28, United States Code, § 1254. This petition seeks review of a judgment by a panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. The Eleventh Circuit Court issued an unpublished opinion affirming the conviction and sentence on April 12, 2005. The petitioner filed a petition for reconsideration and for rehearing *en banc* which was denied on June 8, 2005.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS INVOLVED

The Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution provides:

> In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

(i) Course of Proceedings

Petitioner Amzad Lalani is a 42 year old father of two. His wife, co-petitioner Wendy Lalani, is the 37 year old mother of their two children. Neither have any criminal history.

The petitioner was arrested, as were numerous co-defendants, on March 14, 2002 on a 138 count indictment, alleging a conspiracy to transport in interstate commerce stolen goods, as well as related substantive counts. The trial commenced on September 8, 2003 and concluded with a conviction on September 17, 2003. He was free on bond until his voluntary surrender to serve the 121 month sentence imposed after conviction at trial. Petitioner Lalani is presently incarcerated and serving a custodial sentence of 121 months. His wife, co-petitioner Wendy Lalani, is serving a custodial sentence of 63 months.

(ii) Statement of Facts

In the year 2000, Amzad Lalani, who owned a convenience store, went into the wholesale distribution business, selling typical convenience store items, such as razors and over the counter medications. The business was called Amber Distributors. The facts urged by the government were essentially that cooperating defendant Mohammad Gaffar conducted a theft and fencing operation out of his own convenience store in Atlanta, Georgia, using his employees to purchase stolen merchandise from "boosters" and then sell it to Amber Distributors or other customers with wholesale businesses.

The government alleged that the total value of all the merchandise handled by the conspiracy was over $13 million. At sentencing, the court found that the retail value of said merchandise was $9 million. That value drove the sentencing calculation under the then mandatory guideline scheme. In addition to the amount of loss, other guideline sentencing enhancements were applied at sentencing which were found by the judge, not by the jury beyond a reasonable doubt. The trial court sentenced all three of the co-petitioners to the lowest end of the guideline range.

The petitioner's sentencing occurred before this Court's decision in *Blakely v. Washington*, 542 U.S. 296, 159 L. Ed. 2d 403, 124 S. Ct. 2531 (2004). There were friends, relatives and neighbors at sentencing who spoke to the court regarding the high character of the petitioner, who had no prior criminal history.

The petitioner appealed his conviction on several grounds, raising numerous trial and sentencing issues, including *Blakely* and *Booker* issues. After a very active

oral argument, with lengthy discourse on many of the significant issues raised on appeal, the conviction and sentence was affirmed. A petition for rehearing *en banc* followed, which again denied relief based upon *United States v. Rodriguez*, 398 F. 3d 1291 (11th Cir.), *cert. denied*, 162 L. Ed. 2d 866, 125 S. Ct. 2935 (2005).

REASON FOR GRANTING THE WRIT

I. WHETHER THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT IS CORRECTLY APPLYING PLAIN ERROR REVIEW TO SENTENCES PURSUANT TO *UNITED STATES V. BOOKER* WHERE THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT IS APPLYING PLAIN ERROR REVIEW IN A MANNER WHICH CONFLICTS WITH OTHER CIRCUITS AND WHERE ALL THREE CO-PETITIONERS WERE SENTENCED TO LOWEST END OF GUIDELINE RANGE.

Judge Posner of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit has said of the Eleventh Circuit's tortured plain error analysis in *Blakely* pipeline cases:

> **[W]e cannot fathom why the Eleventh Circuit wants to condemn some unknown fraction of criminal defendants to serve an illegal sentence.**

See United States v. Paladino, 401 F. 3d 471, 485 (7th Cir. 2005) (emphasis added). Numerous other courts have similarly directly criticized the Eleventh Circuit's interpretation of plain error under *Booker*. *See United States v. Coles*, 403 F. 3d 764 (D.D.C. 2005) (criticizing the Eleventh Circuit's decision in *Rodriguez*, *infra*, and following the Seventh Circuit approach to simply ask the district judge

whether a different sentence would have been given); *United States v. Hughes*, 401 F. 3d 540 (4th Cir. 2005) (noting that the Eleventh Circuit's language "demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to affect substantial rights"); *United States v. Williams*, 399 F. 3d 450 (2d Cir. 2005) (criticizing Eleventh Circuit approach, noting, "no reason to risk leaving in place a sentence that might be materially lower or higher" than the one that would have been imposed absent the error).

In *United States v. Olano*, 507 U.S. 725, 113 S. Ct. 1770 (1993), this Court held that in order to satisfy the plain error test, the defendant must demonstrate (1) error, (2) that it is plain, and (3) that it affects substantial rights. If these three conditions are met, an appellate court may then exercise its discretion to notice the error if it seriously affects the fairness, integrity, or public reputation of judicial proceedings. *See Johnson v. United States*, 520 U.S. 461, 117 S. Ct. 1544 (1997).

The Eleventh Circuit has held, like the other circuits, that a *Booker* error is an error which is plain. *See United States v. Rodriguez*, 398 F. 3d 1291 (11th Cir. 2005). Where the Eleventh Circuit plain error analysis conflicts with the other circuits is what is the standard for meeting the third prong of the analysis, i.e., what type of record is sufficient to show a reasonable probability of a different result. *See id.*

The Eleventh Circuit has interpreted the third prong of the plain error test as requiring a defendant to show in absolute terms that the result would have been different. The Eleventh Circuit is looking for an affirmative statement in the record that the District Judge would go lower

if only he could. As has been found by so many other courts, the Eleventh Circuit is wrong.

The defendant need only show a reasonable probability that the sentence, imposed by a Judge under an unconstitutional, mandatory, guidelines scheme, would be lower. Said another way, the Eleventh Circuit should be asking the question: Is our confidence in the outcome undermined? The Sixth Circuit has found that where the District Judge has sentenced to the low end of the range and expressed sympathy for the defendant, that is sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome. *See United States v. Hamm*, 400 F. 3d 336 (6th Cir. 2005).

The Eleventh Circuit, the Eighth Circuit and the Fifth Circuit have specifically found that a sentence at the lowest end of the then-mandatory guideline range, without more, is not sufficient to raise a reasonable probability that the court may have imposed a lesser sentence under a non-mandatory guideline scheme. *See United States v. Fields*, 408 F. 3d 1356 (11th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Demarick*, No. 04-15136 (11th Cir. July 12, 2005); *United States v. Leisure*, 412 F. 3d 857 (8th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Ellefson*, No. 04-1293 (8th Cir. August 23, 2005); *United States v. Espinoza-Gamez*, No. 04-50415 (5th Cir. June 3, 2005). Implicitly, the Eleventh Circuit's decision in the instant case also finds that the sentence at the lowest end of the guideline range was insufficient to meet the third prong of the plain error test in the Eleventh Circuit.

This is directly at odds with other circuits which have expressly found that a sentence at the lowest end of the guideline range available under the then mandatory scheme was sufficient to meet the third prong of the plain error analysis. *See United States v. Henry*, 408 F. 3d 930

(7th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Hamm*, 400 F. 3d 336 (6th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Rone*, No. 04-5682 (6th Cir. July 27, 2005).

Some of the Circuit Courts have adopted a presumed prejudice standard due to the radical sweeping change in the sentencing regime, noting the difficulty criminal defendants will have demonstrating that their sentence would have been different. *See United States v. Barnett*, 398 F. 3d 516 (6th Cir. 2005). The Second Circuit observed that it is "impossible to tell what considerations counsel for both sides might have brought to the sentencing judge's attention had they known that they could urge the judge to impose a non-Guidelines sentence." *United States v. Crosby*, 397 F. 3d 103 (2d Cir. 2005). The Third Circuit, in *United States v. Davis*, 407 F. 3d 162 (3rd Cir. 2005) ordered the remand of every case pending on direct review with a *Booker* sentencing issue in order to:

> [E]nsure that each defendant to whom *Booker* applies is sentenced accordingly. This approach results in uniform treatment of post-*Booker* defendants on direct appeal, fostering certainty in the administration of justice and efficient use of judicial resources. Moreover, as the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit has noted, "correction of error in the context of sentencing does not precipitate . . . burdensome and often lengthy consequence[s]" on remand. [cite omitted]

Id. at 165-166. The Ninth Circuit, as well, advocates a limited remand to determine the issue of whether the sentencing court would have sentenced differently under a non-mandatory guideline scheme. *See United States v. Ameline*, 409 F. 3d 1073 (9th Cir. 2005). The Ninth Circuit noted the inherent unfairness of requiring the defendant